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Mideast Mistake

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Serbia and Croatia are at war. Armenia and Azerbaijan are probably next. And who knows, if Gorbachev is right maybe Ukraine and Russia will follow. It is a world of troubles. And yet the center of the Bush foreign policy universe remains fixed. On what? On the West Bank.

The administration's determination to achieve a just disposition of this territory a third the size of Chechen-Ingush, commendably humanitarian. But what makes it such a paramount American national interest? What—apart from president's *idée fixe* and a secretary of state's dreams of Nobel—is impelling such an enormous expenditure of American diplomatic capital? Fear that our Arab friends, out of solidarity with the Palestinians (who so recently betrayed them in the gulf war) and anger at the Americans (who saved them in the war)

Washington can't "deliver" Israel.

will go over to the Soviets? What Soviets? Fear that our Arab friends will defect to the Arab radicals? What radicals? Their leader is Saddam Hussein, and his hands are full chasing around his own country after teams of U.N. inspectors.

Bush's fixation on forcing an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict might be written off as misallocated priorities. But it is far more than that. It is distorting the peace process itself.

Consider the issue of the site for the bilateral talks between Israel and its neighbors. The hard-line Arab position was to continue the talks in Madrid, so that they would be seen as a mere continuation of the international conference and not as direct talks with Israel. Israel wanted alternating sites in Israel and the Arab countries. That was how the Sadat-Begin talks were conducted, and it helped the talks succeed. The going and coming of Israelis and Arabs in each others' cities helped prepare their publics for mutual acceptance and reconciliation.

What happened this time? Israel and Jordan were discussing a compromise—a Mediterranean site—that might have satisfied both parties. Then word came that the administration had chosen Washington as the site. The Jordanians promptly stopped returning Israeli phone calls.

The surest way to undermine the peace talks is to undermine their bilaterality. And the surest way to undermine bilaterality is for the administration to control and force every step from Washington.

Why? Because if Americans are waiting outside the negotiating room ready to break every impasse with a made-in-

Washington solution, the Arabs have no incentive whatever to offer Israel any compromise inside the negotiating room. They can simply take any maximalist position they want, let enough time pass for American impatience to grow and then fully expect Washington to step in again with an ultimatum that the Israelis, because of their dependence on the United States, will be in no position to reject.

The venue issue, dismissed in the West as mere wrangling over procedure, was the first test of the whole negotiating process. However inadvertent, the administration message to the Arabs was clear: The bilaterals are for show. The real decisions will be made by us. We'll deliver Israel.

This is a disastrous message to send because it ensures that the talks will fail. The Israelis will only respond to peace overtures coming directly from their enemies. Sadat's genius was understanding precisely that. He understood that by directly addressing the Israelis, rather than going through the usual Washington mailbox, he could break through. The Israelis then reciprocated with breakthroughs of their own. Washington did come in to mediate (Camp David), but only at the end of the process.

Baker came in before the process even began. By doing so he reinforced the old pre-Sadat Arab view that the way to get things out of Israel is to negotiate with Washington and then let Washington negotiate with Jerusalem.

To show that this will not work, Shamir decided to delay by five days Israel's arrival at the talks. This left Baker and Bush "upset by what they consider Mr. Shamir's obstinacy," reported the New York Times. They are said to find it almost impossible to understand how the Israeli leader, who still hopes to win loan guarantees from the United States, could risk further undermining relations with Washington.

Now, what Arab negotiator is going to engage Israel in offering mutual concessions when he can plainly see that an upset president is prepared to use loan guarantees, among other levers at his disposal, to extract from Israel unilateral concessions?

The Israeli government was extremely clumsy in choosing a change of dates as a way of showing resistance to American heavy-handedness. Nonetheless, the message was important. It had been assumed that Israel could not afford to risk presidential and media displeasure by refusing a State Department summons. Shamir proved that assumption wrong. By showing that he is not so easily delivered, he told his Arab partners that if they want the talks to succeed that will have to deal with him, not Jim Baker.

It is Margaret Tutwiler's plaintive and daily refrain that "we cannot want these talks more than the parties themselves." Well then, act like it. Let bilaterals be bilaterals. Get out of the way and let the parties deal with each other. If they can, fine. If they can't, then we cannot make peace happen on our own. There are a lot of other problems, foreign and domestic, that could use our now diverted attention.